

CHAPTER I

SHADOWS ON SCUTARI PLAIN—THE VOICE IN THE
CHAFI BISHKASIT—THE LANDS OF THE HIDDEN
TRIBES—A WOMAN OF SHALA.

000 **W**HEN the sun rose over the blue, snow-crested mountains that are the southernmost slopes of the Dinaric Alps, it made, on the Scutari plain, a pattern of our shadows; shadows of four small wooden-saddled ponies, each led by a mountaineer with a rifle on his back, of two tall, ragged gendarmes, and of a small trudging boy in a red Turkish fez—all moving single file across an interminable plain shaggy with blossoming cactus.

• [492] The wooden saddles were three-sided boxes made of peeled branches; padded beneath with sheepskins, they fitted over the ponies' backs. On top of them our blankets were packed; saddlebags hung from the four corners; enthroned in the midst we rode, comfortable as in an easy-chair, sitting sidewise, our knees crossed, smoking cigarettes and rocking gently with the ponies' pace. And all this was to me an enchantment suddenly appearing above the surface of well-arranged days, as new South Sea islands rise before a mariner in hitherto familiar waters.

Three days earlier the mountains of Albania,

6: Lane T-3 (no date) 1923 EGI Albania EGI



EROK PEROLLI

[58a]

PEAKS OF SHALA

000 "You cannot do such a thing to the byraktor of Shoshi!" said the Shala man.

"I have done it to the byraktor of Shoshi," said I, violently, gasping on the trail. I kept my knees stiff with sheer rage, but on the first terrace above the byraktor's house not even that could keep me going, and I sat down in a heap on the trail to rest.

The sun had not yet cleared the top of the stupendous sweep of striped rock that soared above the chasm; it could hardly do so before noon. The cañon was filled with silver light; the rain itself seemed silver; the rose and blue and white of that great cliff glowed softly through it, and the greens of the little fields below were soft as mist. I sat looking at this, and insensibly realizing why time was so little to these people, and how unimportant, really, all our little hastes are.

Then, coming leisurely across the green, like little toys on a carpet, appeared the byraktor, his gendarme, and the minute mule. In half an hour they reached us, calm and unperturbed.

● 492 The donkey bore a wooden saddle quite as large as himself; they placed me on this and leisurely began to climb.

"To-night," said I, firmly, "I shall be in Scutari."

Rexh translated this to the byraktor, but the byraktor said nothing.

We proceeded slowly over the mountains.⁷
This was wilder going than I had yet seen, and
7 [From Shoshi to [262] Scutari -- Analyst]

PEAKS OF SHALA

again the simplicity of these people was borne⁴⁹² in upon me. Coming to places that, to any European understanding, would be absolutely impassable, the byraktor's action was simple and direct. He wrapped around his wrist the steel chain that held the mule by the neck, and easily, without haste, he went on. The mule came, too; it could not do otherwise, and when it would have fallen the steel chain and the gendarme's firm grip on its tail kept it going until its feet got their grip again. I was, of course, on the mule's back, and where it went I went, too.

The byraktor and the gendarme thought⁰⁰⁰ nothing of thus casually carrying between them a mule with me on its back, and very shortly—so adaptable is the human mind—I thought little of it myself. I recall sitting there, comfortable in that armchair of a saddle, taking my smoked glasses out of my pocket and polishing them; the sun was piercing through the clouds, and the glare on the snow above was blinding to my eyes. We were passing along a trail really too narrow for the mule; my knees grazed a cliff; a glance over my shoulder went straight down into depths where pine-tree tops looked like a lawn; at every second the mule's tiny hoofs slipped and rocks showered downward, the chain tightened around the byraktor's wrist and the muscles of his shoulders knotted as the mule's weight bore on them. It crossed my mind, as I settled the smoked glasses on my nose, that two weeks earlier my heart would have stopped at

POSTSCRIPT

Cicero sat with parchment and stylus, writing³⁶¹ home to Rome for money to pay his way back—because, as he admitted with some chagrin, he had wasted all his substance in that merry and wicked city. Even for Cicero Durazzo had, in addition to its living charms, the flavor of antiquity, for the Roman city was built on the ruins of the older Albanian seaport.

A year earlier there had been no automobiles in Albania, but now, to our surprise, we found a valiant small Ford waiting at the pier, and engaged it at once to take us to Tirana, forty miles away. Our baggage was a problem until^[609] the chauffeur of a government truck, addressing us in French, volunteered on his own responsibility to take it to the capital for us. "Pay? *Mais, non!*" said he, hurt. "You are Americans, and the stranger in Albania is our guest."

The road from Durazzo to Tirana crossed the⁴⁹¹ low mountains that, from Trieste to Valona, make the endless monotonous eastern wall of the Adriatic. When you come over the crest of them you see lying before you the green low central valley and the farther blue peaks of the lands of the hidden tribes. And everything accustomed,⁴⁹² everything commonplace, everything that reflects ourselves to us, is left behind. Gray water buffalo, flat-nosed, curly-horned, monstrous beasts that seem risen from depths of primeval slime, plod down the road drawing high, narrow wagons of wickerwork on huge wooden wheels. Shaggy, small donkeys carry picturesque folk down the

POSTSCRIPT

[492] winding road to Shijak, the village by the river
491 where the bridge begins and ends in willow groves.

Beyond Shijak the road goes over the last low
[133] hill, and twenty miles of plain lie before it, most
sparsely dotted with the great white houses of
the beys of central Albania. Against the eastern
sky the towering mountains, with their eternal
smoke of clouds, catch the last rays of the sun
and make magic with it. For an hour the colors
shift and change, plum purple, orange gold,
mauve and violet and sea green, until at last
only a pale gold moon and a silvery star shine
in a lemon-yellow sky. And the seven white
minarets of Tirana lift above the green of trees.

342 Dusk was on the plain, and lights were glim-
mering through little houses here and there,
when we came to Tirana. No, the lights do not
glimmer through windows; these houses of peas-
ants on the great estates have no windows, as
they have no chimneys. The light of the eve-
ning fire, built on the earthen floor, shines through
walls woven of willow withes, and the smoke
seeps through thatched roofs.

373 Before us twinkled the street lamps of Tirana.
These are literally lamps, filled every day with
kerosene and set on their poles, to be lighted
with a match after the evening call to prayer
from the minarets. Our little car passed between
low, ghostly white walls, and stopped before the
gendarmerie. An officer came out, lifted one of
the street lamps from its pole and held it over
the car door, the better to see us.

491 especially near the sea, where the soil is alluvial and stoneless, had to be thirty-two spans wide (7 yards or 6.48 metres) in order to give a pack-horse space to dodge the mud-holes in winter, when the road became a morass. Excellent examples of this type of road traverse the half-drained marshes of Ngurëzë at the mouth of the river Mat.

Mountain roads eight spans wide led to villages 'where carts had never gone'. Certain other roads led to the rare villages 'where carts had gone'. These crossed firm inland plains such as the floor of the valley of Shkrel or the plain of Nangë in Lumë; in Shkrel they had to be twelve spans wide (8 feet or 2.43 metres), and in Lumë wide enough to take a cart. A picturesque detail from 112 Mirditë is that a 'flag-road', that is to say, a road along which a flag was carried in tribal, wedding or other processions, had to be as wide as the flagstaff was long.

491 Roads always followed boundaries; as a general rule, when one
481 passed two wards or two neighbours, exactly half of it had to be in
423 the territory of each. In other words, their boundary had to run
312 down its exact middle. Few modifications of this law are to be noted. When fields were on a slope, the road between them was often made on the upper one. The elders laying it out had reasoned that it would gradually slip down the hill, increasing the area of the upper field and diminishing that of the lower one. When there was an irrigation channel by the road, rules varied. In Theth one neighbour left three spans of land for the channel, and the other the same amount for the adjacent footpath. Their agreement might be verbal, noted only by witnesses, or it might be written down by the priest as tribal clerk and placed in the church archives. Each neighbour had full access to path and channel alike. In Lumë, on the other hand, a path was left on both sides of an irrigation channel. These were not only for men to walk on but also for maintaining the sides of the channel, a necessary safeguard even on level ground. Each neighbour, having his own path, was less liable to quarrel with the other.

492 In Perlat a highway was twenty-four spans wide (16 feet or
494 4.86 metres), to enable a horse laden with firewood to pass another without the loads touching. Elsewhere there was no provision for two-way traffic. Road-making in our sense did not exist, and roads were merely trodden out by man or beast in the scanty space available between fields or across mountain slopes. On a typical

road two loaded donkeys might meet and pass, but two loaded horses could not. When these met, one or the other had to step aside from the road, turning back, if need be to find a suitable place in which to do so. This was almost invariably of nature's making; there were no artificial passing places as on narrow motor roads in England.

Load generally determined priority of passage. To use Albanian phraseology, when a riding-saddle met a riding-saddle on a horse-track the one with no saddle-bags or other load besides the rider had to turn back. The riding-saddle had to make way for the loaded pack-saddle, but had priority over an empty one. When two pack-saddles met, the one loaded and the other empty, the latter had to make way for the former. When they were both loaded or both empty, the one which was nearer a possible place at which to step off the road had to turn back. The same rules applied to carts. In the rare cases where there was plenty of room for two loaded horses or carts, there was no 'Keep right' or 'Keep left'; they could pass on whichever side they wished.

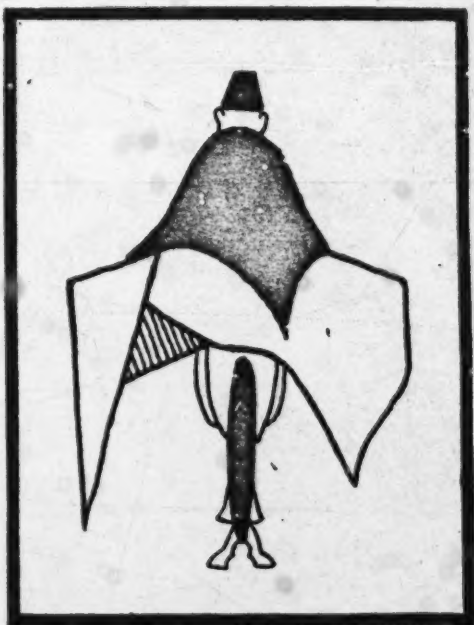
The rules about priority were apt to be honoured in the breach rather than the observance. A man who was turned back on his road felt, even if priority was not his, as much disgraced as if his gun had been taken from him. His honour was lost, and could not be redeemed unless he killed his rival. There have been many deaths for the sake of precedence. The men of Godolesh, who were satisfied when the offender was fined by the elders, were condemned by their neighbours as soft and citified. But even in Godolesh there was no more fertile cause of murder than disputes about who should have the right of way. The trouble arose because priority rules were often confused, especially on purpose by strong wilful men, with the general law of road ownership. As enunciated by Father Gjeçov, this law said that a village street or a public highway was nobody's individual perquisite, but belonged to one man as much as to another. Hence, the living and the dead—traveller and live-stock, bride and corpse—had an absolute right to use either, and no man, even if the road passed close to the door of his house, could deny this right.

A road was free to all. It was for breaking this general law that highway robbery was punished so much more severely than other forms of theft, and that a traveller who killed a dangerous dog on a highway did not have to compensate its owner.

To the Land of the Eagle

○○○ day and the conditions for travel could not have been bettered. I felt perfectly happy and contented. Poor innocent! I little realised what was before me.

492 The horses¹ had neither bridles nor bits, nor even headropes, a headstall decorated with blue beads being the only



A PACK PONY

harness. But as it soon became apparent that they knew every inch of the way, the uncomfortable feeling engendered by the absence of head-rope or guiding rein wore off, and we resigned ourselves to being carried along like so many bundles of merchandise. The lead horse went ahead unhesitatingly;

¹[For author's experiences riding from Padgradetz to Elbasan, see cat. III, pp. 208-225 - Analysis]

The Albanian Pack-horse

not a word was said or a touch given to guide him during 492
the whole difficult journey from Podgradetz to Elbasan.
Indeed, the intelligence of these pack animals was a revelation
to me. I could actually see my beast think. If there were 000
a choice of ways over a bad bit of ground he would hesitate
momentarily and then take the one he considered the best.
If he had to pass a post or a tree, after a similar slowing-up
he would move outwards a few inches to allow the pack to
clear the obstacle, then, with a little shake of the head which
said as plainly as words could, "That's all right!" he would
resume his normal way. His intelligence, however, did not,
I must admit, extend to the vertical, and he would pass
under tree branches without any regard to the rider on his
back. The edge of a precipice, when we got up into the
mountains, was an irresistible temptation to him, perhaps
because the edge offered a bit of smooth and unbroken
ground, and I suffered many agonising moments on account
of this idiosyncrasy. It is alarming, when you are unused
to it, to find yourself looking down into space from the back
of an animal over which you have no manner of control. I
vividly remember, as we were at a particularly awkward
corner where the path sloped downwards and outwards,
the pack animal in front of me slipping and only with
difficulty recovering himself. I held my breath as my beast
passed the danger point. And I recall some hair-raising
seconds when my horse was taken with a fit of coughing on
the extreme edge of what appeared to be a bottomless abyss.
But, to be quite fair to the creature, he always went slowly

491

the border to Prizren. This was an old Roman road, and has probably not changed much in a thousand years. At Kukës another road meets it, running south along the Black Drin to Peshkopia and outside Gheg country to Lake Ochrida and Korça. Parts of this road had been widened for vehicular traffic in 1929, but the wide pieces had not been connected. It is said that both these roads have been opened for motor traffic since the Italian occupation.

Another trail goes from Tirana to Zall, thence to Gur i Bardh in Mati, through Klos, across the divide to Bulçiz in Dibra, and thence to Peshkopia. This is the principal route between the new capital and the important region to the northeast. Still another passes from Lesh to Bureli in Mati (fig. 9, c) following the banks of the Mati River. Bureli, now a prefect station, has grown important only with the Zog regime. From Bureli one can proceed to the northern Catholic country of Lura and Kthella, and thence down into Dibra, but the road is little traveled. North of the Drin a trail passes from Scutari to Shoshi over the Gur i Kutch, but in winter this is impassable. On the other side there is a road from Kukës across the Drin through the *bairaks* of Bituç, Gashi, and Krasniqi, past Merturi, into Shoshi (fig. 8, d). In winter this can be passed by men but not animals. Hence in wintertime no animal traffic can enter either Shoshi, or Shala which lies to its north. Before the boundary was drawn between Albania and Yugoslavia the road from Tropoya, in Gashi (Malisia e Jakovës), to Jakova was much traveled; but now this is forbidden and the people of this tribe must go to market in Kukës.

492

482

As far as any considerable traffic is concerned, horseback and human back are the only methods of land transport available in Ghegania. In a few of the flatter places, however, other means are used locally for short

493

distances. In the country around Scutari just below the mountains, the farmers use carts, particularly in Zadrime. In Luma, on the flat land at the confluence of the Drins, and in Has on the other side, carts are likewise used, as well as ox-drawn summer sleds.

491

Crossing streams is not a simple matter in Ghegania. Most of the crossings are fjords, and very cold. I have seen men strip naked to swim across icy rivers in search of a place for

ANALYS-

1 [see cat. 116, p 109

-196-